



Exploring Malaysian Peneram Cakes and Indonesian Cucur in Depicting Diversity of Taste and Cultural Togetherness

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Abstract

Traditional cuisine plays an important role in reflecting the identity, social values, and cultural philosophy of a society. This study aims to explore the cultural meaning, diversity of flavors, and social values contained in two similar traditional cakes, namely Kue Peneram (Malaysia) and Kue Cucur (Indonesia), as representations of Malay-Nusantara cultural unity and identity. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with an observational design, semi-structured interviews, and field documentation conducted in Kampung Melayu Raya, Johor, Malaysia, and several regions in Indonesia. The results show that Kue Peneram is an adaptation of a South Indian food, *adhirasam*, which has been acculturated with Malay culture, while Kue Cucur developed independently in Indonesia as part of the agrarian community's tradition. Although they have similar main ingredients, such as rice flour, brown sugar, and coconut milk, they differ in processing techniques and taste. Peneram has a dense and chewy texture, symbolizing steadfastness, while Cucur, which is fluffy and soft, represents hospitality and balance in life. In addition, these two cakes have symbolic meanings in various traditional and religious events, serving as social glue and a medium for cultural value inheritance. Therefore, the preservation and international promotion of this traditional cuisine

is important to ensure that the Malay-Nusantara cultural heritage remains alive amid the tide of globalization.

Keywords: Traditional cuisine, Kue Peneram and Kue Cucur, Culture and Cultural Identity, Food Innovation, Social Cohesion.

Introduction

Traditional cuisine is a cultural heritage that not only fulfills food needs but also holds social, symbolic, and national identity meanings. Traditional foods often represent a long history, interethnic interactions, and cultural acculturation processes that shape the character of a society (Hurdawaty Ramon & Ngana Katharina, 2020). In the archipelago, the diversity of culinary is a reflection of the rich culture, traditions, and local wisdom that has been passed down from one generation to the next.

In Southeast Asia, particularly in the archipelago, traditional cuisine plays a special role because it reflects cultural richness while also demonstrating the historical ties between neighboring countries. Traditional foods are not only enjoyed for their delicious taste, but also feature in various communal moments, such as traditional ceremonies, religious celebrations, and social gatherings. This makes cuisine an important medium in building solidarity and preserving cultural identity (Fadlurrahman, 2023).

Traditional foods in this region also serve as a social glue that strengthens bonds between individuals and groups. In various traditions, food is served not only to satisfy the palate, but also to celebrate togetherness, foster friendship, and maintain social harmony. This phenomenon is evident in the culinary traditions of the Malay people spread across several Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia (Hisyam et al., 2024). Despite having different variations and names, traditional foods in this region still show strong cultural connection.

Malaysia and Indonesia, as two neighboring countries, share a close connection in terms of language, culture, and culinary traditions. Geographical proximity and shared historical roots mean that many traditional foods in both countries are similar in terms of ingredients, preparation methods, and the philosophy behind them (Nurhayati et al., 2016). However, each country still has its own distinctive characteristics, adding to the richness of the culinary heritage of the archipelago.

In the context of traditional cuisine, Malaysia is known for kue Peneram, a snack made from rice flour, brown sugar, and coconut milk, which is fried until brown and has a sweet taste. Meanwhile, Indonesia has cucur, a traditional snack made from flour mixed with sugar or additional ingredients such as bananas, corn, or coconut, then fried until it is round or crispy in texture. (Astuti et al., 2023) .

The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the cultural meaning behind two traditional cakes, namely Kue Peneram and Cucur. This study aims to trace the history, philosophical values, and roles of these two foods as symbols of Malay identity in Indonesia and Malaysia (Fauzi et al., 2022). Additionally, it seeks to compare the diversity of flavors, ingredients, and processing techniques that demonstrate cultural adaptation and culinary richness.

Literature Review

Traditional Cuisine as a Representation of Culture

Traditional cuisine is an important part of intangible cultural heritage that reflects the identity, history, and social values of a community. In Southeast Asia, traditional foods serve as a medium for social interaction and a symbol of cross-ethnic solidarity. For example, Kue Peneram in Malaysia and Kue Cucur in Indonesia are not only special dishes, but also representations of togetherness and the cultural richness of the Malay-Nusantara (Ali, 2025). Additionally, traditional foods play a role in preserving local values amid the tide of globalization. The traditions of cooking and serving these foods are passed down from generation to generation as a form of cultural identity preservation, present in traditional ceremonies, religious events, and communal celebrations (Fauzi et al., 2022).

The origin and development of Kue Peneram and Cucur illustrate the dynamic exchange of culture and adaptation of local resources. Peneram, known in northern Malaysia, was inspired by the South Indian *adhirasam* and modified with ingredients such as rice flour, coconut milk, and brown sugar to symbolize harmony and sweet family relationships (Isam et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Kue Cucur, a traditional Indonesian snack derived from agrarian traditions, represents simplicity and gratitude, often used in religious and social rituals (Affandi et al., 2024). Both cakes, while sharing rice flour and brown sugar, differ in preparation methods: Peneram uses light fermentation for a chewy texture, while Cucur is poured from height to create a fibrous and crispy form. These culinary differences demonstrate regional creativity while maintaining shared cultural symbolism (Solikah et al., 2024; Sri Rahayu, 2024).

Philosophical Values, Cultural Functions, and Modern Challenges

Traditional cakes like Peneram and Cucur embody moral and social values such as togetherness, loyalty, and balance. Their collective preparation reflects the cooperative nature of the Malay-Nusantara community and strengthens social bonds during cultural gatherings. These foods are not merely culinary products but also carriers of symbolic meaning serving as offerings, blessings, and expressions of unity within society (Novita Savitri et al., 2022).

However, modernization and globalization pose challenges to sustaining these traditions, as modern lifestyles and fast-food culture lead to declining interest in traditional cuisine. Preservation efforts can be achieved through packaging innovation, flavor enhancement, and digital promotion to engage younger generations (Hana, 2023). Governmental and institutional support from Malaysia and Indonesia through cultural programs, festivals, and creative economy initiatives also plays a vital role in ensuring that traditional cuisine remains a living representation of cultural identity (Herindra et al., 2024).

Methods

Data Collection

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method using an observational design to describe the cultural significance embedded in the traditional *Kue Peneram* and *Kue Cucur*. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and field documentation.

Interviews were conducted for approximately 35 minutes with the community and *Kue Peneram* entrepreneurs in Kampung Melayu Raya, Johor, Malaysia, and with *Kue Cucur* makers in Indonesia to obtain information about the ingredients, manufacturing process, and traditional meanings. Observations were made by directly observing the manufacturing and serving processes of both cakes, as well as tasting them at the production sites and traditional markets to understand their role in the social context of the community. Documentation in the form of photos, videos, and field notes was used to reinforce the research findings. The entire process was carried out while maintaining research ethics, data authenticity, and the consent of the informants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using descriptive thematic analysis, with the aim of understanding the relationship between the ingredients, taste, and cultural values inherent in *Kue Peneram* and *Kue Cucur*. The analysis process began with data reduction, which involved selecting the results of interviews, observations, and documentation to focus on relevant information such as the main ingredients, the manufacturing process, and the cultural meaning contained therein. Next, the data was presented in the form of descriptive narratives that illustrated the relationship between traditional cuisine and the social life of the community, showing that these two cakes are not just food, but also symbols of identity and togetherness. The final stage is data validation (triangulation) by comparing the results from various sources of interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure the accuracy, authenticity, and consistency of the information obtained in accordance with the descriptive ethnographic approach.

Results

History and Origin of the Tradition

Peneram cake originated from the cultural acculturation between the Tamil community of South India and the Malay community in the Malay Peninsula. Tamil traders who came to this region brought with them their culinary heritage, including *adhirasam*, a traditional cake made from rice flour and brown sugar. Over time, the local community adapted the recipe with local ingredients such as gula kabung (Malaysian palm sugar) and coconut milk, giving birth to *Peneram* cake with a slightly different taste and shape from the original version. This shows that cuisine can be tangible evidence of cross-cultural interaction, producing a new identity without erasing the roots of previous traditions.

Meanwhile, *Cucur* cakes developed independently in various regions of Indonesia, such as Java, Sumatra, and Kalimantan. There is no strong evidence to suggest any direct outside influence; rather, they are the result of the creativity of local communities who made

use of rice flour, palm sugar, and coconut milk, ingredients that are abundant in the tropical archipelago. The tradition of making this cake has been passed down from generation to generation and often varies in shape, color, and taste depending on the availability of local ingredients. Kue Cucur thus reflects the local wisdom and adaptability of the Indonesian people to natural resources.

Ingredients and Manufacturing Process

Both cakes use rice flour, palm sugar, and coconut milk as their basic ingredients, but the difference lies in the processing and frying techniques.

For Kue Peneram, the dough is usually fermented briefly to produce a chewier and denser texture. It is then fried slowly over low heat until it turns dark brown and gives off a strong aroma of palm sugar. This process produces a "heavy" and rich flavor, which is suitable for the rich taste of Malay cakes.

Meanwhile, Cucur Cake is made with dough that is immediately fried quickly in hot oil without a long fermentation process. This technique makes the edges crispy while the center is soft and fluffy, creating a contrasting sensation with every bite. The color of the cake tends to be lighter, and the sweetness is milder compared to Peneram.

Sensory Characteristics and Flavor

Sensory-wise, Peneram has a dense, chewy, and richly sweet texture, with a strong aroma of palm sugar that gives it a "heavy" and traditional feel. This cake is often considered a filling food with high symbolic value in Malay traditional ceremonies.

Meanwhile, Cucur has a soft sweetness, a soft texture in the middle and a crispy edge, and a brighter color. This cake is lighter and can be enjoyed as an everyday snack. The combination of flavor and texture makes Cucur popular in various regions and appealing to all ages.

Social Value and Togetherness

Peneram cake is often served at feasts, Maulid Nabi, and village celebrations in Malaysia. The process of making it is often done together by women, reflecting solidarity and collective work in traditional Malay society.

Cucur cake plays a similar role in Indonesia, often appearing at tahlilan, selamatan, and hajatan. The tradition of *rewang*, or working together to prepare for events, strengthens the values of kinship and mutual cooperation in rural areas.

Symbolic Meaning and Cultural Identity

Peneram cake, which is round with a hole in the middle, symbolizes wholeness, balance, and the cycle of life, in line with the value of harmony in Malay culture.

Cucur cake, with its blossoming shape in the middle, symbolizes prosperity, openness to fortune, and family happiness. This meaning explains why Cucur is often served at thanksgiving ceremonies and family celebrations.

Relevance and Preservation in the Modern Era

Both Peneram and Cucur now face the challenges of modernization, but also opportunities for preservation through innovation.

In Malaysia, Peneram has been modernized through the use of instant flour, evaporated milk, and modern frying techniques, without losing its traditional shape and taste.

In Indonesia, many SMEs produce Cucur in various flavors (such as pandan, chocolate, and durian) and package them in a modern way for the tourism market and culinary festivals. These efforts help preserve the existence of traditional cakes as part of the nation's intangible cultural heritage.

Discussion

The study reveals that the history and origin of Peneram Cake and Cucur Cake demonstrate how traditional foods reflect both diversity and shared cultural identity within the Malay–Nusantara region. Interviews with Malaysian cake makers indicate that Peneram is an adaptation of *adhirasam*, a South Indian delicacy introduced by Tamil traders to the Malaysian Peninsula. This culinary exchange led to a process of acculturation in which local ingredients such as rice flour, coconut milk, and palm sugar were used while maintaining the original round shape. These findings align with (Fauzi et al., 2022) report, which emphasizes that the adaptation of Peneram resulted from long-standing Malay–Indian cultural interactions through trade and intermarriage (Fauzi et al., 2022). In contrast, Cucur Cake developed independently within Indonesia's agrarian society, symbolizing the culinary autonomy of local communities. As stated by (Savitri et al., 2022). Cucur emerged from household traditions and became a “people's cake” frequently served during communal and village events. Although both cakes arose from different historical roots, they share a similar social meaning—serving as representations of identity and unity among the Malay–Nusantara people.

The ingredient composition and processing techniques of both cakes further highlight the cultural connections and local adaptations within the region. Field observations reveal that Peneram and Cucur use similar base ingredients—rice flour, brown or palm sugar, and coconut milk—but differ in their sugar type and preparation method. Malaysian versions typically use concentrated palm sugar, resulting in a denser texture and stronger flavor, while Indonesian Cucur uses coconut sugar, creating a lighter taste and softer texture. These variations reflect each community's adaptation to local resources and preferences (Savitri et al., 2022). Moreover, modern food technology has influenced traditional recipes, as the use of pregelatinized rice flour in Cucur has been shown to reduce oil absorption by up to 18.14% without altering its authenticity. Thus, similarities in ingredients emphasize shared cultural roots, while differences in technique illustrate local creativity and innovation.

In terms of sensory characteristics and taste, observations and interviews show that Peneram Cake has a dense, chewy texture with a sweet, caramel-like flavor, whereas Cucur is soft inside and blooms at the center. These physical differences reflect not only cooking

techniques but also cultural symbolism, as sweetness is interpreted as a metaphor for social warmth and kindness within Malay and Indonesian communities. This finding supports (Wachidah et al., 2025). who noted that traditional foods serve as emotional and social expressions of community values. Hence, flavor in traditional cakes is not merely a sensory aspect but also a medium of cultural communication.

The social value and function of togetherness are central to both cakes' existence. In Malaysia and Indonesia alike, Peneram and Cucur are commonly served during feasts, weddings, religious events such as *Maulid Nabi*, and community gatherings. The communal activity of preparing these cakes, often referred to as *rewang*, strengthens social bonds and promotes cooperation. Studies confirm that traditional foods act not only as economic commodities but also as instruments of social cohesion and cultural solidarity. Thus, the making and sharing of these cakes symbolize the spirit of togetherness embedded within Malay–Nusantara society (Hisyam et al., 2024).

The symbolic meanings and cultural identity behind these cakes further enrich their importance. The circular shape of Peneram, with its hollow center, represents wholeness and balance in life, while the blooming form of Cucur is viewed as a symbol of prosperity and openness to fortune. Some community members even interpret the “blooming” Cucur as a prayer for flourishing livelihood. As (Disma et al., 2025). explain, symbolism in traditional foods expresses moral values and collective identity, turning these cakes into cultural languages that communicate the life philosophy of the people.

However, these traditions face challenges in the era of modernization. Interviews indicate a declining interest among younger generations, mainly due to changing lifestyles and the growing preference for instant food. Nonetheless, preservation efforts are ongoing through culinary festivals, education, and digital promotion. Scholars such as (Ali, 2025) and (Disma et al., 2025) highlight that digitization and online marketing of traditional foods are effective ways to sustain their relevance in a globalized world. Preservation therefore depends not only on familial transmission but also on community innovation and institutional support.

Finally, innovation and revitalization efforts are helping traditional cakes remain relevant without losing their cultural essence. Observations show that entrepreneurs in Malaysia have introduced pandan-flavored Peneram and modern packaging, while in Indonesia, Cucur is promoted online as a “heritage snack.” These strategies align with findings by JKKN (2023) and (Setiarto, 2021). which suggest that innovation and digital promotion strengthen the local gastronomic identity and increase economic value. Such revitalization demonstrates that traditional cuisine can evolve while preserving its cultural roots, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of Malay–Nusantara culinary heritage.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that Kue Peneram (Malaysia) and Kue Cucur (Indonesia) represent the cultural identity of the Malay-Archipelago through their similarities in basic ingredients, symbolic values, and social functions. Despite their differences in origin and processing techniques, both are symbols of harmony, togetherness, and community identity.

The sustainability of these two culinary traditions shows that traditional foods are not only economically valuable but also serve as a medium for preserving intangible cultural values.

However, the challenges of modernization and changing lifestyles have led to younger generations becoming less involved in preserving traditional cuisine. Therefore, an integrated preservation strategy is needed through cultural education, culinary documentation, community training, and digital promotion. Collaboration between the government, cultural institutions, and the creative industry needs to be strengthened so that these culinary traditions can innovate without losing their original cultural meaning and remain relevant at the national and international levels.

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